



Local nonprofit says: "No kid sleeps on the floor in our town." Page 16



It's a first: De Pere freshman wins state wrestling title Page 28



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Disregarded



Robert has been living on the streets of Green Bay for more than a year after he said he was evicted from his stable living situation in Sturgeon Bay due to testing positive for COVID-19. He said he is unable to work because of chronic pain, and won't go to the shelter because of the other personalities there, which he said he struggles with.

Josh Staloch Photo

Tensions run high at Green Bay council meeting

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

GREEN BAY – A discussion on the possible use of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars toward green infrastructure projects quickly turned heated at the Tuesday, Feb. 1, City Council meeting.

Some council members questioned Mayor Eric Genrich's place in the conversation.

The topic involved discussion and possible

See MEETING page 6

A look toward the future

Mental health aspect of homelessness needs to be addressed

"It has to be a community effort to make any progress in addressing homelessness."

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

BROWN COUNTY – On a single night last week, as temperatures dipped into the single digits, volunteers traveled throughout Brown County counting the sheltered and unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness.

Required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Point-in-Time (PIT) counts, held twice a year in January and July, provide a snapshot of homelessness in communities throughout the country.

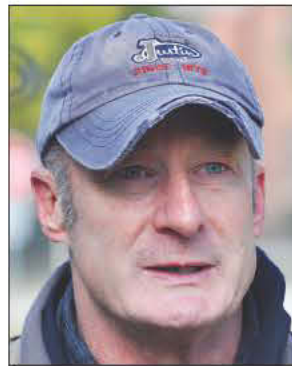
Though PIT counts won't be available for a few weeks, it's safe to say that number is likely in the several hundreds.

Over the past few weeks, The Press Times' Disregarded series has shined a light on the state of homelessness in the county.

And as Brown County's struggles with homelessness didn't happen overnight, solutions to it haven't come quickly either.

But before a solution can happen, actions need to be taken.

"Right now, we have to say to ourselves, 'What are we doing next?'" Paul VanHandel, coordinator of Newcap's Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), said. "You know, within this year, within next year? Because this is staring us



Paul VanHandel

right in the face, and it's not going away. It's going to continue to be a burden... We can move the problem,

but that's not solving the problem. If somebody has nowhere to go, they have nowhere to go."

VanHandel said there is no question in his mind Brown County's homelessness struggle is a crisis.

"It's 72 people, to me, when 50% of them have such significant mental health needs, to me, that's a crisis when they're living outside unsheltered," he said.

VanHandel said he'd love not to have to coordinate a HOT team.

See HOMELESS page 14

McAuliffe Elementary students get extraterrestrial visit

BY JOSH STALOCH STAFF WRITER

BELLEVUE – Students at McAuliffe Elementary School in Bellevue got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to speak with Mark Vande Hei, NASA astronaut,



Mark Vande Hei

See SPACE page 11



888 Cheese & Co., located on Lineville in Suamico, opened its doors at the end of last year. Submitted Photo

Grilled cheese + Suamico = ooey-goey perfection

BY KATIE LEACH CORRESPONDENT

SUAMICO – Beer and cheese – can't get more Wisconsin than that, right?

888 Cheese & Co., located in the former Taco John's off Lineville in Suamico, which opened at the end of last year, pairs nicely with its neighbor – Ahnappé Brewere.

See CHEESE page 4



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HOMELESS
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"I know some other people would say, 'Well, you know, there are cities that got it a lot worse,'" he said. "Do you really want to compare yourself to places where it's worse? I'd rather go around talking about what we're doing here that's accommodating people and bringing them in, rather than what's keeping them outside and what we're ignoring. Because I don't want to coordinate a HOT team, if we don't have the answers that people need. There's nothing worse than going out and talking to somebody that has no idea what's wrong with them and leaving them in that capacity to serve themselves and to sit there."

VanHandel said though many have sought shelter at St. John's last resort shelter, he isn't slowing down.

"Now, (St. John's) is open, so we again saw this huge decrease, but I'm not breathing a sigh of relief at all, because these people I've got to look at in the shelter and say, 'What the hell is going on?'" he said. "I've spent hours talking to people that are just hollow shells of themselves."

VanHandel said work needs to be done now, so the cycle doesn't continue to repeat itself.

"Are we hiding them now for the next six months, and are we going to wait for them to come out?" he said. "I need to work with shelter case managers and say, 'Hey, we need to identify a plan for this individual, and see if we, together, or me, or somehow can bring in a provider to get them to a place they need to be by April 30. So, come May 1, we aren't just scratching our heads and going, 'Gee, our most serious, chronic,



Beth Hudak with House of Hope said the community's first step in the path to solving homelessness is adjusting its expectations.

Heather Graves Photo

homeless people are back on the street in the park,' and we repeat this whole process again."

St. John's Executive Director Lexie Wood said it's hard to compare today's numbers to previous years, because things have been so different with COVID.

"To speak in general terms, we have a building capacity of 84," she said. "That's our permit with the city. Yet, we never turn anyone away due to capacity."

Wood said 69 people sought shelter the first night of the season - Nov. 1, 2021 - and by night two, that number was already up to 78.

"We always operate at well over capacity," she said. "It's just a matter of how quickly you reach that threshold."

In comparison, the 2020-21 shelter season, (Nov. 1 - April 30), Steve Schauer, St. John's director of Community Engagement, said 562 individuals were served, with 15,994 nights of shelter provided.

In addition, The Micah Center and Wellspring - St.

John's daytime resource centers - collectively saw more than 1,500 individuals walk through their doors last year.

In 2019-20, the 180-day season brought in 562, with 20,145 nights of shelter provided - which was one of the greatest need seasons in the shelter's history

In the 2018-19 season, 445 individuals were served, with 14,473 nights of shelter provided.

"We've been (at capacity) the past couple years," Wood said. "The fall prior to COVID starting, we had already seen really high numbers. We were at overflow every single night. COVID has certainly had an impact, but the need and the complexities of homelessness and kind of the breakdown of so many bigger systems is something that's been at play for quite some time, and certainly is not unique to just this fall."

VanHandel said City of De Pere Police Officer and HOT member Tony Phelps and the department's new social worker, John Bushmaker,

have been supportive allies. "Communication is happening with all these different agencies," he said.

Will Peters, neighborhood support specialist for the City of Green Bay, said the Green Bay Police Department does a really great job at working with the homeless population.

"I think there are generally misconceptions that people have," Peters said. "Whenever they see an officer with a homeless person, they assume they are fining them or getting them in trouble, but really they are doing an assessment."

He said a lot of what the city's role is right now in addressing homelessness is being a facilitator.

"(We're) helping to bring the organizations to the table and trying to really

know resources exist.

The unity campaign brought together Freedom House, Golden House, House of Hope, New Community Shelter and St. John's (Green Bay's newest shelter Safe Shelter was not yet open) to highlight their efforts toward addressing homelessness in Brown County.

The five shelters now share one website, which includes individualized information pertaining to each shelter's focus.

The combined effort also highlights the area's "No Wrong Door" policy - which means no matter who an individual is, and whether or not they qualify for the services at the shelter they contact (by phone or in person), all shelters will help connect them to available resources in the community.



providers are really going to "stop, dig our heels in, and find out how we are going to address that, because we have to."

Beth Hudak, director of community engagement at House of Hope, said the community's first step in the path to solving homelessness "is to admit that we don't know."

"That's just such an important part of what we'll be able to do as a community to really solve homelessness is to admit that we don't know, and we need the voices of other people," Hudak said,

“We need to be comfortable enough as a community to change what we are doing now,” Beth Hudak said. “And sometimes that means those decisions don't look how people looking from the outside think they should.”

look at this issue from a community-wide perspective, as a community issue," Peters said. "It is not just the responsibility of an organization, one service provider, the county, etc. Really, it has to be a community effort to make any progress in addressing homelessness."

Banding together

Late last year, five Green Bay area shelters came together to announce a united message - "Look Homelessness in the Eye: Let's Face it Together" - a collaborative campaign aimed at raising awareness about the area's homeless population, with a goal of making sure people

Terri Refsguard, New Community Shelter chief executive officer, said shelter representatives meet regularly to discuss what's happening and how best to address it.

"The biggest topic of discussion is about the individuals who fall through the cracks because of severe mental health, which cause behaviors that don't work out in a shelter, or even in an apartment," she said. "We sat down, invited Brown County Health and Human Services representatives, and talked about those individuals that none of the other shelters are able to serve. What we found out is that the county has the same problem. They can identify all the issues, but where do we find housing for them?"

Refsguard said service

"and that means that we can't have all of our meetings at 11 in the morning, without people at the table who actually know things because they've experienced it. We need to meet in the evenings. We need to provide child care. We need to provide transportation, and it means we need to adjust our expectations of how we put together a plan to include the people it is going to affect."

She said she knows change can be hard.

"We need to be comfortable enough as a community to change what we are doing now," Hudak said. "And change is hard for people, but we have to have enough trust in the people we are serving to hear what they are saying, and then actually

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act on that and make changes to what we are doing right now to solve that problem.”

Hudak said societal expectations limit a person's ability to get themselves out of a situation and thrive.

“Because there is this sort of thought, ‘We’ll you’re in this bad place, I know what you need,’ she said. ‘We try to make sure that our programming provides an opportunity to say ‘You’re wrong, here is what I need,’ and we say, ‘Ok, let’s try it, and if it works, let’s just always do that.’ Every person is different, which is why the things that our community really needs are people who listen well, and can support decisions that may not (match) your societally standing or culture, like what you would do, but that doesn’t mean they are wrong, it just means they are different.’”

She said it’s very important to remember that when making decisions, “we have to look at how every decision we are making is going to affect the most vulnerable, voiceless people that we might encounter.”

“And sometimes that means those decisions don’t look how people looking from outside think they should,” she said.

Hudak said people living in poverty and experiencing homelessness are the experts at what it is like to live in poverty and experience homelessness.

“That means, they know what they need to get out of that situation,” she said, “but we have created systems that don’t allow them to access those things. And it’s not just formally-created systems within the U.S. Government. It’s also smaller



Terri Refsguard said it's time for the community and service providers to figure out how to address those who continue to fall through the cracks.

social pressures and community systems.”

Non-traditional shelter

Wood said though the pandemic did magnify disparities and issues that already existed, mental health barriers are not unique to pandemic years.

Refsguard said it's time for the community and service providers to figure out how to address those who continue to fall through the cracks – the chronically homeless, those with mental health issues and those with medical challenges.

“Though we have a lot of

“ Though we have a lot of people in our community with huge hearts that may bring sandwiches. Well, that’s nice, but it’s not helping the person in the long run.”

- Terri Refsguard

“If I had to summarize homelessness in our community down to one single cause, which isn’t really possible because it’s a complex problem, I would speak to mental health and just the breakdown of mental health services at a national level,” she said. “Really, I believe we are only beginning to scrape the surface of understanding mental health as it relates to overall wellness, as it relates to development, in, kind of, every regard.”

people in our community with huge hearts that may bring sandwiches,” she said, “well, that’s nice, but it’s not helping the person in the long run.”

Refsguard said the concept of non-traditional shelter has been discussed as a possible solution.

“We have come together and said, ‘Yep, here is the gap, and here is what we need,’” she said. “It sounds like an assisted-living setting.”

VanHandel said HOT has discussed this very same thing. “The Homeless Outreach Team has gone from working with people in traditional shelters to saying, ‘Hey, what does non-traditional shelter look like?’” he said. “We’ve talked about recovery care, or care in a non-traditional shelter model for three things: people needing medical or physical recovery models, mental health and then the third one is permanent disability or whatever we would consider a permanently disabling condition,

which could also be a severe mental health issue – a mental health issue that is just ongoing and will never be, as far as we can tell, something that’s corrected through treatment, like a life illness.”

VanHandel said the mental health aspect of homelessness needs to be addressed.

“This community-based residential facility model, you can certainly get licensure and try,” he said. “So, that’s something that we’re going to be looking at – those types of solutions, so we don’t repeat where we were last time, then start building this list of people. Because if we don’t do something to impact it, you know as well as I do, we will see this again next year, and it will be this way or worse. And to let that happen is not the right thing, and I think everybody agrees with that.”

VanHandel said it needs to get done.

“We definitely want to be able to say ‘We have this shelter, and it’s going to be something that will address more broad needs for people who have this going on.’ And we aren’t going to stop there. We saw people last summer getting discharged from the hospitals in the area doing recovery – medical recovery – on the street, in the park, in wheelchairs, with casts on their legs. You can’t do medical recovery on the street. That’s ridiculous.”

VanHandel said a homeless management information system is also needed.

“Clarity, they call it in this area for data entry for homelessness,” he said. “We need to get these people that are unsheltered, really spell it out in an information system as to what was going on, so that the data-tracking people can maybe draw an algorithm behind it. I want to look at the people we work with, too, and say, ‘Hey, this is what I was seeing, does that match what you were seeing now that the data has been input?’”

VanHandel said things aren’t there yet, because things change so fast, but it’s a goal.

“Things move so fast,” he said. “We haven’t caught up with it yet. We’re so busy working with real live people out on the street that doing data entry and keeping up on that problem, we just didn’t have time. It just snowballed

on us. It just totally got away.

VanHandel said it’s important to note that this space wouldn’t be an institution.

“It’s got to be something that people would look at and go ‘It’s not like we’re inviting them to an institution, but more of a non-traditional shelter where we can then look at those behavior aspects that are really, really essential to get at the core problem of what’s going on with that person,’” he said. “And then really begin to wiggle it down through people that are really experts in the field that are treatment providers that can do it.”

Refsguard said “the solution seems simple, right?”

“But, it requires a place and it requires money – it’s like a group home,” she said. “It’s so simple, but it all boils down to money. But there

NEXT WEEK:
The Disregarded series continues to look to the future – jobs, affordable housing and the Greater Green Bay Blueprint to Prevent and End Homelessness, as well as ways for the community to effectively help the homeless population.
The series finale piece will also detail an effort The Press Times looks to launch to contribute to the solution.

are people in this community that might read something like that, that would say ‘Let’s do it.’ I hope that person, or persons, are out there.”

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